DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 179 617 UD 019 860

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TITLE Thoughts on Research in Asian American Studies.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the National Association for Asian American and Pacific Education Conference (San Francisco, California, April 25-27, 1979); Not available in paper copy due to reproduction quality of original document

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Asian Americans; *Community Benefits; Higher Education; Relevance (Education); *Research; *Research Utilization; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS *Asian American Studies; California (Locke); California (Sacramento); University of California Davis

ABSTRACT

The field of Asian American Studies was developed partially as a result of the recognition that the history and contemporary concerns of Asian Americans had been neglected or distorted as a field of academic inquiry. Because of its unprecedented nature, the difficulties involved in developing such a program at the University of California Davis campus were many. Two of the primary problems confronted were: (1) conflict between an emphasis on research as opposed to an emphasis on practical activities; and (2) the resulting dichotomy and conflict between the univeristy campus and Sacramento's Asian American community. The Asian American Studies program strived to resolve these conflicts through the formation of research guidelines which could be utilized to: (1) provide an accurate history of Asian Americans; (2) influence policy; (3) advocate and bring about change; (4) predict community needs; (5) facilitate an understanding of racism and race relations; (6) promote community pride and solidarity; and (7) develop curriculum activities. The involvement of the program in the case of Locke, a rural Chinese American community, illustrates how these guidelines have been adapted to an ongoing research situation. By following the guidelines, other research programs should be able to contribute to the strengthening of other Asian American communities. (Author/GC)

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OCT 1 5 1979

ED179617

THOUGHTS ON RESEARCH IN ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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UD019860

This paper was presented at the April 1979 National Association of Asian American and Pacific Education Conference which was in part supported by funds from the National Institute of Education. However, the views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the policy or position of either NIE or NAAAPE; and endorsement of the paper by either organization should not be inferred.

Thoughts on Research in Asian American Studies

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In this paper, I will share with you the experiences we have had with research within the Asian American Studies program at UC Davis. The paper is, therefore, merely a report of what some of us have experienced collectively not only within the program, but in our relations with Asian American communities in and around Sacramento. It also reflects how we have interpreted and attempted to implement ideas on research gained from the writings of community-concerned Third World and other scholars.

Asian American Studies at Davis, as conceived and initiated in 1969, was directed toward three areas: teaching, community activity, and research. Fundamental to all three was an educational process relevant directly to Asian American students. While teaching has remained central to the program, perceptions of our role in community work and research have changed since the inception of the program. It is in the context of this history that our present efforts at research must be viewed. In addition, guidelines and recommendations will be proposed to help clarify the possible role of research in Asian American Studies.

Perceptions of Research in the Development of Asian American Studies

A significant impetus to the development of Asian American Studies was the recognition that the history and contemporary concerns of Asian Americans had been neglected, badly distorted, or virtually omitted as a legitimate field of academic inquiry. This treatment profoundly affected the attitudes and images of Asian Americans among Asians themselves as well as among others. Thus, an underlying objective of Asian American Studies was to implement a program within the university that would be responsive and accountable to the needs of the Asian American student body. Research in Asian American Studies was seen as vital to begin this work–not only to debunk myths and correct misconceptions, but more importantly, to increase the understanding and promote the viability of Asian Americans as distinct and dynamic peoples. However, this initial objective quickly gave way to practical and more immediate considerations.

The difficulties involved in developing an unprecedented program were beyond estimation. Priorities became confused–where there is nothing, everything seems of primary importance. As an academic unit, the development of courses and the collection of curriculum materials were identified as immediately necessary. Our "research" activities turned to an assessment and consolidation of available materials. Bibliographies, a course reader, a guide to sources of information, etc. were begun.

Once the courses were underway, attention was again directed toward the issue of research. During this period, questions of adequacy, and especially, relevancy, became crucial. Pursuing research in conjunction with the "community" was seen as a possible way to alleviate feelings of isolation and insulation for both campus and community. However, naive attempts to initiate a field office in Sacramento in cooperation with students from Sacramento State and Sacramento City College led to further confusion and questions about university elitism.

It should be noted here that there were important differences between Sacramento students and those from UCD, as well as between the university and the other two college systems. For example, in contrast to Davis students who came from diverse areas, sometimes from areas with no distinguishable Asian population, Sacramento students generally had a definite identification and relationship with their community. Also, Davis students were perceived as reflecting the university's research bias, which often meant research for its own sake, without regard to consequence or implication for those being studied. In fact, the very idea that Davis students, with access to resources and funds not available to state and community college students, would suggest a "research field office" for Asian American Studies smacked of elitism and a misguided sense of priority.

Conflicts arising from such differences seemed insurmountable and the dichotomy between campus and community became firmly established. The "field office" became a community service agency and Asian American Studies concentrated on teaching classes and weathering institutional threats to the program's survival. However, other factors contributing to Asian American Studies' lack of research focus and activity cannot be ignored. Asian American Studies was committed to the ideal of community relevancy, yet lacked clear answers or alternatives to fundamental questions about the validity of traditional social science when applied to minority communities. In addition, the university's support for the Asian American Studies program was minimal and the day-to-day considerations of operating a new program demanded the energies of the limited staff. Much lip-service was given to "doing research," but little productive activity was manifested.

Reassessment of Research Potentials

During the past few years, improved relations between the program and Sacramento community members have resulted from cooperation on issues such as the tenure struggle of Asian American Studies faculty and the Bakke decision. With the stability of the program better assured through the job security of two permanent faculty, Asian American Studies at UCD began a period of reassessment. Included was an examination of its research objectives. Central to the development of any research perspective, however, is a clear understanding of the role of Asian American Studies in relation to the total Asian American community and the audience we purport to serve.

If Asian American Studies is considered a community organization operating within the context of the academe, it then becomes clear that Asian American Studies must utilize resources, skills, and expertise in the most appropriate way to enhance the community. As an educational unit, therefore, Asian American Studies must be primarily concerned with responsiveness to Asian American students. Through the classroom and examples of useful research, Asian American Studies can teach students intellectual skills which may be utilized to benefit the larger Asian American community. In addition, the view of Asian American Studies as a community unit whose major responsibility is education also affirms its role in research as an integral part of the program's activities.

Research Guidelines

Research can be more than an academic goal. As others have pointed out, research can be used to enhance the future of Asian American communities. For example it can:

1. *Influence policy affecting Asian Americans.* Redevelopment programs, the Bakke case, affirmative action plans, the university's work on farm mechanization–all have implications for Asian Americans and require response and participation.

2. *Advocate for change and serve as an organizing tool.* As issues and needs become identified, research such as needs assessment surveys, power structure analysis, etc., may be useful.

3. *Predict community needs.* Studying immigration and settlement patterns and demographically analyzing the current Asian American population can help service groups to predict future community needs.

4. *Provide an accurate history of Asian Americans.* For example, Ichioka has pointed out that there is more to the Japanese American experience than exclusion and concentration camps. Translation projects, oral histories, bibliographies, etc., can lead to a better understanding of the whole Asian American experience.

5. *Facilitate an understanding of racism and race relations.* Through a comparative study of theories of race, we can gain insight into policies and attitudes toward minority groups, as well as possibly develop a conceptual framework appropriate to Asian American Studies.

6. *Promote community pride and solidarity.* Biographies, creative writing, media presentations, etc., can turn the focus away from Asians as victims of circumstance and point to contributions as dynamic and active peoples.

7. *Develop curriculum materials.* The results of all of the above types of research can be used to strengthen Asian American Studies course offerings.

Both theoretical and descriptive research are necessary to provide an adequate understanding of the Asian American experience. However, particular caution should be exercised when conducting community studies. Reliance on existing theoretical frameworks or methodology employed by traditional researchers provides no assurance that research will benefit those being studied. In fact, it has been shown that conventional research methodology and narrow frameworks of analysis have resulted only in providing ineffective, if not distorted, conclusions about Third World communities. Individuals conducting research should have a strong working relationship with the community being studied. A good working relationship emerges from a sense of commitment and responsiveness to the community. Factors such as race, language, class outlook, and political perspective may further serve to establish such a working relationship and also reflect appropriate criteria for evaluating the competence of the researcher and relevance of research topic.

Recommendations

1. Research that can directly benefit the larger or specific local Asian American community is of primary importance. Needs should be identified by community members and evaluated by the campus-community board.

2. Asian American Studies' long-range research objectives should continue to focus on improving and strengthening offerings to meet student needs. It is, therefore, appropriate for the faculty, staff and students of Asian American Studies to determine these needs and initiate action rather than depending on undue reliance for guidance from the greater Asian American community.

3. Ideally, research in the Asian American community begins with the community. Realistically, however, research questions/interests will often come from students and professional scholars. A community-campus board might be constituted to monitor and evaluate research in the community. Possible questions for evaluation are: How will the research benefit the community being studied? What are the researcher's qualifications? (Does s/he know the community's language(s), have sufficient cultural awareness, historical understanding?) How was the topic chosen? In what ways will the information generated be used? How will the researcher benefit? What are the policy implications of the study?

4. Studies concerning community members should also include their participation as consultants, research assistants, etc. As Lee et al have pointed out, in this way, the research process becomes "demystified" and skills/expertise shared.

The Example of Locke

When I first came to Davis in 1970, one of the interests in Asian American Studies among students, staff and faculty alike, was the community of Locke, the rural Chinese American community in the Sacramento Delta. It was mentioned frequently, be it as an illustration in class discussions of community concerns or suggested as a type of situation ideal for research. Of particular interest was the fact that, although the buildings were erected and owned by Chinese, the land on which they stood was and still is not theirs as the result of the Alien Land Law which existed at the time of the town's founding. In this section, Asian American Studies' involvement with Locke will be described as an illustration of how the aforementioned research guidelines have been adapted and applied to an ongoing research situation.

Although Locke has been continually a referent for commentary, it was only after our program began to somewhat stabilize and relations with segments of the Asian American community in Sacramento began to improve that serious attention was given to actual involvement in research with communities. Furthermore, I was personally reluctant to take a leading role with involvement in Locke because I did not have the necessary Chinese language skills and, being Japanese American, felt lacking in the cultural sensitivity that exist only when one has grown up within that tradition.

In spite of these reservations, there were other factors which eventually prompted our involvement with Locke. In 1976 because of public health concerns primarily centering on the water and sewage conditions in Locke, the County of Sacramento, through its Housing and Redevelopment Agency, initiated a study regarding its possible involvement in the maintenance and preservation of the town. Because of the community emphasis of Asian American Studies, we began to follow this interaction between a county agency and an Asian American community with some interest. Somewhat later, Asian City Development, Inc., a Hong Kong-based corporation, bought the land, further complicating the possible future of the community. The rumors that Asian City's interests were primarily for commercial development and profit were given credence when the corporation revealed its plans to build a number of restaurants and curio shops, as well as a pagoda garden behind the existing town, and a 238 unit subdivision of single-family dwellings nearby. Furthermore, after finalizing a preservation plan for Locke, the impact of Proposition 13 nulified the possibility of full implementation of the County plan. It was at this point that the State of California through its Department of Parks and Recreation entered the picture. The department is currently undertaking a feasibility study for involvement. With the future survial of the town as we have known it and the future of its residents in doubt, our interest in writing a comprehensive and definitive history of the community grew.

It was at this point that Asian American Studies decided, whether we felt entirely adequate in undertaking the project or not, that we should direct our efforts toward this task. Some other factors contributing to our decision include our perception that no other Asian American individual nor community group appears to be seriously involved in a comparable activity, our proximity to Locke, and the existing and potential resources which may be generated by working within the university structure. The initial problem was how to work with the community, rather than doing research on it. One cannot work with everyone in the community, even if it is a town as small as Locke, with a population of approximately 70 people.

Fortunately for us, there was a group, relatively representative of various interests in the community, which could serve as a point of contact. The Locke Project Area Committee (PAC), composed of fourteen residents, business people and non-resident building owners, had been formed as an advisory group to county agencies. Of their members, nine are Chinese and five are not. Although there were limitations in the composition of PAC, it became for us, the working definition of "the community" at least as far as carrying out the "administrative" aspects of our research. Our proposed research was discussed with it; and after some discussion, it agreed to serve as the "community advisory group." The concept of a joint community/university research project appeared to have been actualized. Several research proposals were written and submitted, primarily centering on doing extensive oral history. Funding was requested for the hiring of qualified and appropriate bilingual bicultural research staff.

Currently, background library research is being conducted without support funds; but more importantly, efforts are being devoted to establishing a strong and mutually respectful working relationship between the total Locke community (i.e., beyond PAC) and Asian American Studies. This effort, commonly referred to as "establishing rapport," involves community action.

As a way to better understand the community, we began to regularly attend PAC meetings, which generally met on a monthly basis. As we did so, we were requested by PAC to appear with them, and in some instances, appear for them to testify or provide other supporting statements before various board meetings and hearings. As "experts" in Asian American history and community development, some PAC members felt that our university affiliation and titles provided an additional source of credibility in these efforts to influence public agencies. Thus, our attempts to conduct research has drawn us into becoming a part of the community's moves to influence and control their future. As we worked together, other ideas, such as a conference on the "The Future of Locke," was conceived. Here again, the role of Asian American Studies was to identify and suggest an activity not readily conceived by the people in the community, propose how it might be accomplished and utilize university resources to accomplish them.

While such activity is a component of community action in its own right, it also provides us the opportunity for participant observation and thus has a research component to it. After all, a definitive study of Locke would need to understand the current situation as well as the historical.

Research Guideline Implications

The example of the Locke project, to some extent, reflects each of the previously outlined research guidelines as follows:

1. *Influence policy.* Asian American Studies expertise is being utilized for community preservation policy development. As the definitive history is completed, we anticipate playing a strong role in shaping historical preservation policy, whether this involves public agencies or private groups (e.g., historical societies).

2. *Advocate and organize.* Although we have not developed hard facts and figures through systematic research as suggested by the guidelines, we have played an advocacy role in conducting the Locke Conference. The purpose of the conference was to inform representatives of the larger Asian American public as to what was happening to Locke so as to provide an opportunity for participants to support the residents of Locke in their bid for community survival.

3. *Predict community needs.* Being participants in community action efforts has provided us with the opportunity to better understand the problems faced by people in the communtiy. Sometimes implications of these problems are not as readily apparent to the residents as they are to others who are involved from a somewhat different perspective. Such views can be shared and explained to the town's people, thus helping them to more clearly understand their needs.

4. *Provide an accurate history.* This point appears obvious. Although the people in the community have expressed a desire for their history to be written, they did not have the resources nor inclination to do so themselves. Yet their desire to have an accurate history of their community, I believe, existed before Asian American Studies appeared on the scene.

5. *Facilitate an understanding of racism and relations.* Participation in various aspects of community action has provided first hand contacts with public agencies and other non-Chinese groups who are also attempting to influence public policy. This dynamics of power and politics, at times, reflect both blatant and subtle racism. The manner in which the people of Locke and their supporters handle these situations provides a case study in race relations.

6. *Promote community pride and solidarity.* The fact that all of these activities are manifestations of community self-determination and accomplishment promote community pride and solidarity in and of themselves. The extent to which Asian American Studies involvement supports and reinforces this process contributes positively to this effort.

7. *Develop curriculum materials.* Not only will the eventual publication of a definitive and comprehensive history of Locke contribute in this way, but various reports and working papers involved in community action are currently being utilized in our own program. Such materials, with appropriate editing, may also be incorporated in readers and similar curriculum materials to be developed for wider distribution.

Summary

Because of the specific nature of the community of Locke–a small, relatively isolated, rural town with a single, relatively representative group–the guidelines we have suggested were able to be applied with relative ease. It should also be noted that we have not fully initiated the oral history with the community; and so it may be premature to present such an optimistic tentative report on our experience with Locke. Nevertheless we are optimistic, and it is hoped that the ideas presented here may also be helpful and encouraging for similar efforts in considerably differing contexts.

Footnotes

1. For comments related to "campus and community" dichotomy, see George Woo, "Service and Action" and the report on the "Service and Action" Workshop, particulary comments by Mason Wong in Kagiwada, George, Sakai, Joyce, and Lee, Gus (ed.). Proceedings of the National Asian American Studies Conference II. Davis, CA.: Asian American Studies, 1973, pp. 29-30 and 55-57 respectively.

2. See Hirabayashi, James A. "Research and Studies" in Kagiwada et al, op cit, pp. 25-28 and Campana, Ed, et al. "Research in Third World Communities," Asian American Review 2:1 (1975), pp. 86-104. For similar as well as contrasting views, see Journal of Social Issues 33:4 (1977) devoted to "Research among Racial and Cultural Minorities: problems, Prospects, and Pitfalls."

3. Campana et al, pp. 91-93.